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ABSTRACT

Gender differences in spoken and unspoken emotional expression exist and may be related to gender differences in other realms, particularly in self-esteem. This literature review investigated gender differences in communication, particularly as related to emotional expressiveness, detection of emotional responses, and self-disclosures, in relation to sex-role learnings and self-esteem. Results of the literature review suggest that gender differences in responding to, and sending out, non-verbal indications of emotions exist. Self-esteem for females may depend highly upon success in relationships, which may lead them to be more apt to communicate negative aspects of the relationship as well as negative feelings, in hopes of fixing what is seen as wrong. Males may well appear more defensive, perhaps even unable to express and detect deeply felt emotions. Such gender differences reflect traditional values and assumptions about the nature of the sexes. Perhaps women do serve as the emotional mirrors for their mates' feelings, and yet their mates must be sensitive to this, if not to their own feelings, in order to form a happy relationship in which the wife feels somehow rewarded for her efforts at emotional expressiveness. (Author/ABL)

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Gender Differences in Communication

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Running Head: Gender Differences

Abstract

Gender differences in spoken and unspoken emotional expression exist and may be related to gender differences in other realms, particularly in self-esteem. The purpose of this paper was to investigate gender differences in communication, particularly as related to emotional expressiveness, detection of emotional responses, and self-disclosures, in relation to sex-role learnings and self-esteem. It was suggested that gender differences in self-concept and self-esteem may account for gender differences in communication. Implications of gender differences in communication as related to couple satisfaction were discussed.

Gender Differences in Communication

Communication has often been suggested as a causal or contributing factor in marital satisfaction and a vital aspect in family functioning. Satir (1967) and others have suggested that marital and familial discord is associated with problems in communication. Pleasant discussions, conversations about shared interests, sensitivity to a partner's feelings, and more communication on a non-verbal level have been shown to be correlated with happy marital relationships (Navran, 1967). Yet the quality of communication and its relation to marital happiness may be directly associated with certain gender differences. Further, such gender differences may be directly related to learned attitudes concerning sex roles, and to consequent gender differences in the meaning and functioning of self-esteem. The purpose of this paper is to assess gender differences in communication and the relation between such gender differences and self-esteem.

A relation between communication and self-esteem was suggested by Satir (1967) who developed the theory that one's level of self-esteem influenced one's communication, and that low self-esteem was the causal factor in creating communication problems in families. Yet missing from such an analysis is the effect of gender differences in

communication as a whole. In particular, gender differences in emotional expressiveness, detection of non-verbal cues, and self-disclosure, have been found (Balswick & Avertt, 1977; Hall, 1979; Notarius & Johnson, 1982; Rubin, 1984; Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-schetter, 1980).

Sensitivity to a partner's feelings has been found to be a salient aspect in happy marriages (Navran, 1967) Females appear to be generally more sensitive to their partner's feelings than males (Notarius & Johnson, 1982). Gottman (1979) pointed out that mindreading, thought by therapists and others to be detrimental to relationships, was actually related to maintaining good marital relations. Specifically, insensitivity of the husband, and inability to mindread on the part of the wife, was associated with inability to resolve marital conflicts for couples who were unhappily married.

Literature Review

Gender differences in both the verbal content of, and non-verbal emotional expression connected with, communication appear to exist. Such differences are highly related to traditional gender roles. Males are generally considered to be less emotionally expressive, and less apt to self-disclose feelings, than are females (Rubin, 1984). Evidence exists that gender differences in self-esteem also

exist (Stake & Orlofsky, 1981), particularly for those who hold traditional gender role attitudes. Gender differences in amount of self-disclosure also appears greatest for those who hold traditional gender role attitudes (Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel-Schetter, 1980). Yet those gender differences in the content of self-disclosures are highly connected to similar differences in self-esteem. The relation between gender differences in communication and emotional expressiveness can be seen as reflective of gender differences in self-esteem.

Gender Differences in Self-Disclosures

Self-disclosure can be seen as one vital aspect of communication (Pittman, Price-Bonham, & McKenry, 1983). Gender differences in self-disclosure have been noted in dating couples (Rubin, Hill, Peplau, & Dunkel, 1980). In that study, not only did females tend to self-disclose to a greater extent than their male partners, but the content of their disclosures offers interesting insights into gender differences. Further, the gender differences in self disclosures were greatest for those who held traditional sex role values.

In that study females tended to self-disclose what they felt was most negative about their partners and themselves, whereas males tended to disclose what they felt was most positive about their partners and themselves. Females also

tended to disclose feelings about their relationships with their families and friends more than did males. This reflects the general findings in the self-esteem literature. As pointed out by Bardwick (1971) and many others, females derive esteem from success in relationships, males from personal (instrumental, job-related) successes. Chodorow (1974) suggested that females define themselves in relation to others in all societies, and this evolves from the feminine role of caregiving. This suggests that females tend to disclose feelings about relationships as a reflection of their major interest, and an indication of the content of their self-esteem.

The positive nature of self-disclosures for males, and negative nature of self-disclosures for females, also reflects qualities of self-esteem. When esteem depends upon the success of relationships, and negative characteristics of any individual in that relationship are seen as possibly detrimental to the success of that relationship, it is possible that females are more likely to reveal this information in hopes of creating a more successful relationship. Males, on the other hand, have been found to take in less negative feedback (Eagly & Whitehead, 1972). Crandall (1969) found that males focused more on positive feedback, females on negative feedback, where that feedback was mixed. Thus, it might be expected that males would be

more apt to dote upon positive aspects as a method of maintaining esteem.

It has also been found that self-esteem is related to self disclosure anxiety, but not to the presence of feelings of hostility, and that there is a relationship between such anxiety and reports of marital cohesion (Pittman, Price-Bonham, & McKenry, 1983). It was also found in this study that males tended to report higher marital cohesion than did females. Perhaps this reflects the feminine view of self-esteem and interest in relationships, and the ability to point out more negative aspects of such relationships. It may also reflect males' inability to reflect, and perhaps even detect, deeply felt emotions, as well as their tendency to dote upon positive rather than negative feedback as Crandall (1969) pointed out.

Gender Differences in Emotional Expressiveness

Emotional expressiveness may be seen as a vital aspect of communication, and traditional gender differences in emotional expressiveness have consistently been found. Hall (1979) reviewed encoding studies and determined that females were generally superior to males in a majority of such studies in their ability to send information in a non-verbal manner. Females have also been found to self-report more frequent expressions of love, happiness and sadness than males (Balswick & Avertt, 1977).

Gender differences in marital arguments have also been assessed in terms of communication and emotional expression. Notarius and Johnson (1982) found that wives expressed more negative feelings, and tended to reciprocate their husband's negative and positive speech, more than did their husbands. On the other hand, husbands responded with more physiological expressiveness according to skin potential responses. At least two possible reasons exist for these gender differences. Rubin (1984) suggested that males display less emotional responsiveness because they are simply unaware of their feelings, and that they thus rely on their wives for such emotional expressiveness. This would help explain why wives were more apt to reciprocate both positive and negative expressions than were husbands. But a second possibility is that gender roles call for males to be less emotionally expressive, and that the physiological response was a method of discharging emotions that were truly felt but could not be shown. Again in this study, as in so many others, females were expressing more negative feelings than males.

Traditional gender role values may place more responsibility on females to maintain relationships. Perhaps this reflects the point that self-esteem for females depends more upon success in relationships. On the other hand, if males are truly less able to reflect or recognize

certain emotional feelings, it may be that females naturally took on this responsibility. Bardwick (1971) points out the greater social responsiveness of females even in infancy, so there may also be certain innate qualities that help account for the differences.

Yet most interesting are the gender differences in marital arguments which differentiate happily from unhappily married couples. Gottman (1979) found that happily married wives tended to mindread and validate what their husband s feelings were, and to thus help bring out the problem issues in order that they might be solved. Unhappily married wives tended to respond more negatively, to not validate their husband's views, and their attempts at mindreading were apt to be taken as criticism. Further, the unhappily married husbands tended to be generally insensitive to their wive's expressions and perhaps their wives became so unhappy over this that they had responded in a manner reflecting their helplessness at reading their husband's feelings.

Perhaps women do serve as the emotional mirrors of their mate's feelings, and yet their mates must be sensitive to this, if not to their own feelings, in order to form a happy relationship in which the wife feels somehow rewarded for her efforts at emotional expressiveness. Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) found that self-worth for females was affected by their views of familial support and

participation, but that this was not the case for males. Although this study involved older adolescents, it is possible that even in marriage women continue to need such feelings of support. It may be that wives are more adept at emotional expressiveness, but that if their mates are insensitive to this, wives suffer lower feelings of self-worth and react by giving up on this role as caretaker of their spouse's feelings.

Discussion and Implications

Communication takes various forms, both at a verbal and non-verbal level, and it appears that gender differences in responding to, and sending out, non-verbal indications of emotions exist. Self-esteem for females may depend highly upon success in relationships. That may lead them to be more apt to communicate negative aspects of the relationship as well as negative feelings, in hopes of fixing what is seen as wrong. Males may well appear more defensive, perhaps even unable to express and detect deeply felt emotions. Such gender differences reflect traditional values and assumptions about the nature of the sexes.

Such traditional values may become an important aspect of self-conception, self-esteem, and even reflect differences thus in cognitive processing. As Burns (1979) and others have noted, the self-concept can act as a filter system through which the world is viewed, and effect even what is selected for attention. Certainly the Notarius and

Johnson (1982) study indicates that men do respond physiologically to emotional content. But males are taught to not express such emotions (Bardwick, 1971) and thus may come to rely on females for such expression, as Rubin (1984) suggested.

In several studies the extent to which gender differences appeared depended upon the degree to which individuals attributed sex-typed attitudes to themselves. This suggests that internalized values, as aspects of the self-concept, play an important role in gender differences in communication. As Bugental and Shennum (1984) pointed out, the importance of belief structures as selective filters in communication must be noted. Gender differences in what is believed to be typical of one s sex may serve as selective filters and thus influence communication It will be interesting to note whether such differences become less as societal assumptions concerning gender differences change. It is therefore important in future research that gender role values held by subjects be assessed.

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